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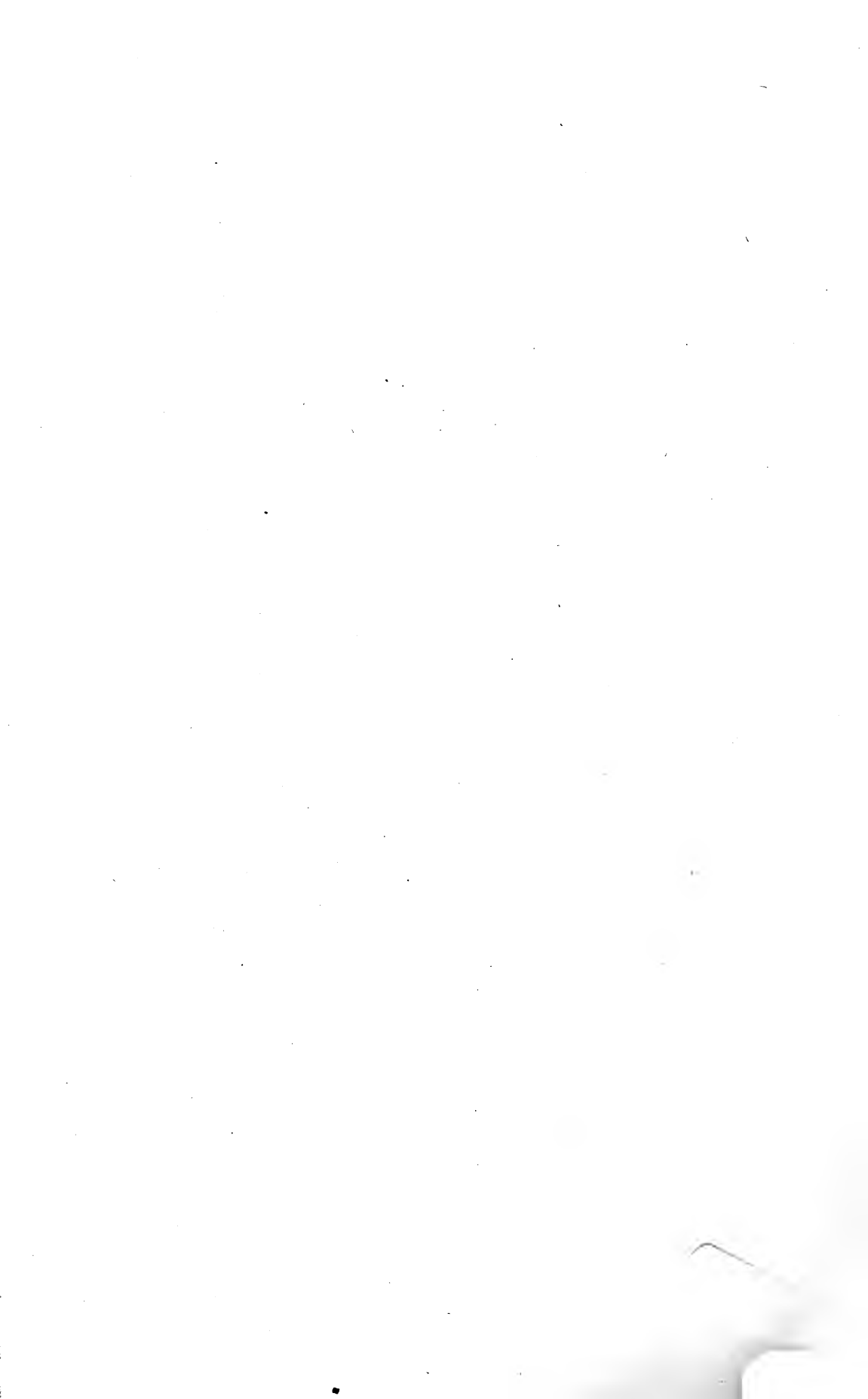
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**OUR NATIONAL POET.**

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OUR NATIONAL POET.

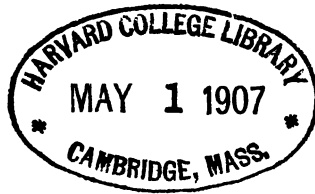
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*The Author.*

## LONGFELLOW OUR NATIONAL POET.

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THE discussion of the greatness of poets sometimes seems as irrelevant as that of the altitude of the mountains. What does it matter that Mont Blanc towers three miles into the air, and Snowdon only three-quarters of a mile, while Ben Lomond is lower still? To Welshmen Snowdon is the monarch of mountains, and so to Scotchmen is Ben Lomond, and round each circles a wealth of associations which could not be finer or dearer were the peak itself as high as Chimborazo. This is true also of national poets, in whose presence criticism by triangulation is often an intrusion. Scotland accepts Robert Burns as her idol, and all your efforts to show up the thin and uneven patches in his verse will avail nothing. Scotland knows that he has great qualities, too, bird notes, exquisite lyric utterances, of passion and regret; Scotland accepts him entire, and will not thank you for pointing out a lame verse or a doggerel rhyme. In other words, there are things deeper than criticism; or at least there are occasions when criticism is out of place.

Every year that passes makes it more evident that Longfellow has come to be the American national poet in much the same sense that Burns is the Scotch national poet. We have drawn far enough away from him and his contemporaries to be able to see clearly that he possesses the national quality to a degree to which none of the others attained. Bryant, Whittier, Emerson, and Lowell had patriotism and the moral outlook in common with him; Bryant and Lowell, like Longfellow, dipped occasionally into European sources; Whittier, like Longfellow, immortalized some of our local or national events; all loved Nature, all observed her accurately and described her sympathetically, — Nature as she reveals herself to a New Englander. But if you compare their work with his, you will

perceive that Longfellow has a representative character which they lack, and a certain something which recommends him to a larger variety of tastes than they can satisfy.

Numbers predicate nothing, of course, as to merit. So the charge used to be made, and one hears it still, that Longfellow owed his immense popularity to his commonplaceness. But the true deduction to be made from his popularity leads in the other direction. Longfellow is popular, not because of his commonplaceness, but because of his art, which has raised millions of his readers above the commonplace. The same domestic sentiment, the same moral precept, the same patriotic desire had been expressed, it may be, many times; he expressed it in the way peculiar to him — the way which added beauty or charm — and it became idealized to them, and his poetic description of it passed current as a household word. That is what I mean in calling him so much more widely representative than, let us say, Lowell or Whittier. Sixty thousand copies of "Evangeline" are reported to have been sold within two months of its publication. Shall we argue from that a triumph of the commonplace, a riot of Philistinism? Far from it; those figures prove the genius of the poet who by his art — delicate and sincere art, sweet art, if ever there were such — could commend a poem of that excellence to so large a multitude of strangers. In other words, a potential appreciation of poetry is latent in a much wider circle than we commonly suppose. Longfellow struck a responsive chord in myriads who were dumb to other singers: that was because of his magic gift, not of his commonplaceness.

Numbers, let us repeat, give no hint as to excellence; and yet, when multitudes love a certain poet and keep on loving him after the bloom of novelty has worn off, the fact of numbers may mean a great deal. It may mean, for instance, that he has universality; that is, that he can describe some of the primal human concerns in such fashion that every one recognizes him as a true spokesman. Now this is exactly what Longfellow did: he uttered our American ideals in poetry which had a national flavor. Nothing could be more genuinely Yankee than Lowell's "Biglow Papers," nothing more unalloyedly Puritan than many of Whittier's poems, and yet the poetry of Lowell and Whittier is too strongly individualized, too obviously limited by the personal idiosyn-

crasy of each, ever to be national as Longfellow's poetry is national.

Longfellow sang not only the ideals of the Settlers and the Founders — Liberty, Independence, Union, and Democracy were still the national watchwords when he began to write, although Union was soon to be tested in the fiery furnace — but to them were being added others, not so much civic and political as social and individual. Our long isolation, which had permitted us to become Yankees instead of Englishmen and to be free instead of subjects of the British Crown, was being broken up. Immigration on a large scale had begun, and it was slowly to change the nature of our racial stock. The American, ceasing to be nine-tenths Anglo-Saxon, was becoming truly cosmopolitan. Henceforth Latin and Teuton, Scandinavian and Slav, must contribute their ingredients to the composite American character. Now Longfellow, beyond all other Americans, knew the spirit of those peoples through their literatures, and by translating many of their poems and by retelling many of their favorite stories he prepared the way for some sort of sympathetic meeting when the strangers began to pour into the United States. The service which he rendered to our culture by infusing into it strains from the Continental reservoirs has been freely acknowledged, but his even greater service as spokesman of the New American has been almost overlooked. That New American is by inheritance a cosmopolite; it required a poet of cosmopolitan culture and sympathy to be his spokesman. Here, again, Longfellow displays the trait of universality which makes him of all our poets the most accessible to our oldest and youngest citizens alike. We may well be grateful that our new populations can through him come to know our ideals of duty, service, dignity, courage, self-sacrifice, kindliness, friendship, affection, and patriotism; for it is, after all, on these primary virtues and affections that the character of man and nation must be built. This also stamps him as our national poet.

Several causes have led the professional literary critics to neglect or belittle Longfellow. Since 1860 literature has ceased to be systematic. Passions and topics once deemed unfit for literary treatment have become almost the staple of recent writers. All sorts of freaks, all kinds of doctrines, have trooped down to the footlights. Sometimes it seems as if the

inmates of all the insane asylums had been given unlimited paper and ink and bidden to write. The morbid, the vicious, the obscene, the ugly have had, under one pretence or another, a hearing. Nothing is respected, for there prevails the feeling that the past is played out. Along with this goes the presumption that truth must be sought chiefly in the abnormal and the odd.

During such a period Longfellow's wholesomeness, his insistence on the elemental human qualities which fashion cannot change nor fads distort, seem almost naïf. So too his clarity — he wrote hardly a line over which philologists could wrangle — is suspect to a generation which regards only riddles as significant, and confounds pathology and poetry. The craving for problems, the disdain for clarity, so symptomatic of the time, have led us to undervalue the plain unvarnished tale, and to overestimate the complex motive, the neurotic emotion, the howl and froth of gusty passions. Such a virtue as self-restraint has been almost eclipsed by the habit in which versemen and story-writers and journalists have indulged of ranting over every ache and pain. So a man who, like Longfellow, maintains his self-control even in poignant grief, is set down as 'cold. But here, too, the enduring verdict will be with him.

Finally, there has been a marked development of metrical technique, especially on the lyric side, which has created a presumption against poetry that appears too straightforward, that has neither intricate cadence, nor luscious epithet, nor phrase bizarre. Without denying that some of this modern metrical growth represents an advance, I suspect that much of it indicates a real weakness and has no more to do with the essence of poetry than has patchouly or musk with beauty in women. Some of us prefer women unscented and we carry this simple Puritan preference into poetry. At any rate, Longfellow ranks, merely as a metrical artist, as one of the few English-writing masters of the Victorian age. Judge him by the range and variety of his metrical achievement, and you will find that only Tennyson and Swinburne have surpassed him, and Swinburne, in spite of all his extraordinary facility as a metricist, has said so little! (Where, indeed, shall we find any other poet who has required so many volumes for saying so monotonously little?) On the metrical side, there-

fore, not less than in the substance of his poetry, Longfellow has the qualifications of a national poet. He employs successfully the great historic metres of our race, he has his own dower of artistic beauty, but there is about him nothing finical nor rococo, nothing that suggests the fleeting wonders at which faddists rise up and worship.

Who shall compute the great gifts he brought us? He put into the finest ballads produced in America some typical episodes. He wrote not only the best sonnets ever written in America, but sonnets which are among the best in English. He made the best metrical translation of "The Divine Comedy." He wrote the epic of the Indian, which, though it may too much idealize its subject, will remain unapproached, for the time is past when that theme is likely to commend itself to a great poet. He embalmed in verse the life of the first settlers, the fortunes of the men of Plymouth, the tranquil joys and tragic end of the French at Acadie. He immortalized many a spot by pouring upon it the elixir of poetry. He commemorated friends whose lives have become a part of our history. He embodied the national ideals of the Settlers and of the Founders — those ideals which made us Yankees; he embodied also the ideals which are making the new generations cosmopolites — Americans in whom blend the traits of many races. Happy are we in such a national poet! No line of his need be expurgated, no thought of his that may not contribute to the upbuilding of nobler men and women, the prerequisites of a nobler nation. And perhaps his most precious gift was his art. By that he beautified the experiences of daily life and gave radiance to culture; by that he touched with a tender and holy awe the mysteries amid which our lives are set. Art seemed so long the one thing lacking here! Longfellow proved that when an American possesses it in large measure his countrymen will respond.















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